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ABSTRACT

Within the English curriculum, a course to provide familiarity with Western culture may prevent the problem of foreign students' misunderstanding Western literature. This problem was observed at Iran Girls' College during an American literature short story class conducted for advanced seniors, none of whom had been in America but whose English proficiency and motivation were high. When the students attempted to interpret John Steinbeck's "How Mr. Hogan Robbed A Bank" and Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home," they were unable to grasp the central ideas of the stories. Even after background information on satire, American cultural characteristics, and symbolism were supplied, the students were able to interpret Steinbeck's story only on a level of detail; on a level of general ideas, they merely repeated the teacher's explanation. In studying "Soldier's Home," the students were confused even more through their ignorance of the basic American family relationships and tensions. To overcome this lack of familiarity with Western culture, an extensive course in the background of Western literature would be extremely valuable for students from other countries. (JM)

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The Culture Gap:
Some Problems in Understanding English Literature

By Phyllis Tezer

It has long been established that students learning a foreign language must learn something of the culture of the people speaking that language, and language teachers must be aware of points of interference between the native and target cultures, in order to provide a successful language learning situation. This is especially true when non-English speaking students are reading Western literature. The culture gap which they encounter interferes severely with their interpretations of even simple literary works. Such problems are frequently found in classes where the students have a limited general knowledge of other parts of the world but are studying at a rather high level.

In order to examine the culture gap more closely, and to see to what extent Iranian students could explicate literary passages that deal with American cultural problems, students in a special short story class for advanced seniors at Iran Girls' College, Tehran, were observed during the 1969-1970 semester. The students in this particular class had had an introductory course in American culture the year before, as part of their English curriculum. None of them, however, had ever been to America or, for that matter, been out of their country much at all. Their level of proficiency in English was quite high; they had chosen the short story class on a voluntary , non-credit basis, and so were highly motivated and interested. The stories given to them to read were not simplified. The emphasis of the course, however, was not placed on making them understand every word, but rather on encouraging them to make their own interpretations of the material in informal discussions. For the purposes of the study, the students' reactions to two stories, "How Mr. Hogan Robbed a Bank," by John Steinbeck and"Soldier's Home," by Ernest Hemingway will be considered.

TE001 151

Before the girls began to read and discuss Steinbeck's story, which was the first one given to them in the course, the meaning of satire was quite fully explained by the teacher. The students were told that this story was written to make fun of American society. Their job, then, was to find out which elements of American life were being criticized and in what specific words and phrases the satire could be found.

Left on their own, the students at first had an extremely difficult time seeing any satire at all. Mr. Hogan was to them an individual, not a symbol of a certain level of American society. Their analysis could not rise above a judgment of whether or not they liked Mr. Hogan. They also seemed to be uncertain about whether robbing a bank is something extraordinary in the United States; they felt that Steinbeck was concerned with the problem of bank robbery. Furthermore, the satirical reference to the Hogan family's religious activities was entirely lost on the students. As Muslims from an almost completely Islamic community, they had no idea what the Altar Guild or a Knights Templar uniform could be, or, of course, how these things were used significantly in the story. Also the "typically American" element, repeated in the setting, characters and plot, was not recognized by the students. In spite of their previous study about American culture, they simply did not have enough knowledge to determine cultural characteristics, nor did they see how these characteristics were satirized. In short, the students could only understand what happened in the story but were utterly unable to discuss the theme.

The next step was to give the students a few examples, as guidelines, of what they were supposed to look for in the story. First they had to be convinced that this story was not about one person but that the entire town and Mr. Hogan represented the middle class in America, and the students had to see that Steinbeck was challenging whole principles and accepted truths

about the middle class. The religious nature of the clubs to which the Hogans belonged was explained as well as possible, although no comparable groups exist in Iran. Next, the typical American small town was outlined to the girls, who were at least already somewhat familiar with the fact that American communities are quite different from Iranian ones. They understood all that was explained to them but did not contribute any thoughts of their own.

Another guideline given to the students was how to look for objects which might have a symbolic meaning in the story. One object which they were told to examine was the Mickey Mouse mask that Mr. Hogan used to cover his face during the robbery. The students were asked to explain why Steinbeck chose a mask for Mr. Hogan, when a stocking over the face (as the students knew well) is a common type of mask for bank robberies. The girls saw no real significance in the use of the mask. After the idea of hypocrisy in society was brought up, however, the students immediately recognized a connection between the mask and a "double face." They then were able to contribute meaningful and interesting interpretations of the mask and discuss attributes of middle class society. The next symbol to be examined, the cat in Fettucci 's store, was easier for them to figure out. Beginning to warm up to the method of interpreting symbols, one student promptly suggested that the cat represented Mr. Hogan's conscience. From that point on, the students were eager to find symbolic meanings in many parts of the story and tried to relate symbolic objects to the general meaning of the story. They explained fully the ironic satire involved in Mr. Hogan's rewarding the children with stolen five-dollar bills. Thus, on a detailed level they were able to find meaning in the story, once they had been given an idea of how to analyze it. On the level of more general ideas, however, their interpretations tended to be little more than repetition of what their teacher had explained to them. Though limited by

their lack of knowledge of cultural background material, they had progressed at least in their understanding of the significance of details as symbols in literature.

The second selection, "Soldier's Home," was chosen to give the students again a look at American society, but with the fore-knowledge that they would have to interpret even more on their own to find the meaning of the story. This time they were given very little help by the teacher but were supposed to contribute their own explications. This particular short story was chosen because of the simplicity of its vocabulary and also because it presented a theme which is beginning to gain importance in Iranian society, the idea of a young person breaking away from his past.

Again the girls' analyses revealed that they had difficulty in grasping the ideas of the story because of cultural misunder-standing. First of all, they discussed the plot; this discussion showed that comprehension and vocabulary were not a problem. Then they tackled the question of how Krebbs had changed during the war. The students described very generally how he and all men are affected by war. The girls were unable, however, to cite specific passages which indicated that Krebbs had altered. That is, in this story they were able to make some general statements but could not pick out details as examples, and thereby showed that their understanding of the story was not very profound. They also seemed to know very little about World War I and its effects upon the world.

The major discussion of the story concerned the character of Krebbs and his relationships with other people. It was in this analysis that a great deal of cultural interference prevented the students from understanding the reading. They did not completely comprehend why Krebbs wanted to leave home; in fact, many of them did not even realize that he intended to leave. To Iranians, leaving home under any circumstances is a big step and is usually

the result of an important difference, not the result of indifference. The students did not read the story from an objective viewpoint; they seemed to sympathize with the mother and knew why she wanted her son to stay, because an Iranian mother would react in the same way. In fact, the mother's possessiveness was not recognized as something unusual; it is a mother's right, to the students' way of thinking, to cling to her son and try to make him remain in the family circle. A similar situation might have been witnessed by some of the students, when a brother has returned from America and been pleaded with to stay in Iran, close to the family. Of course, not being able to recognize these basic relationships and tensions shown by Hemingway, the students really missed the whole point of the story.

Krebbs' relationship with his father was also confusing to the students. In their eyes, it was perfectly normal for the father to control the son's use of the car, because in their country the father may dictate a son's actions long after the young man has reached his majority. This action of Krebbs' father had to be explained to the students as a serious restriction which a young American would certainly resent.

The lack of understanding on the part of the students was not caused by an inability to comprehend the story itself. But they were obviously quite lost in their attempts to see what ideas Hemingway wanted to convey. In this second story, some introductory material would no doubt have helped the students, but what was really needed was an extensive study of family relationships in the United States.

It is apparent from the students' reactions to these two short stories and from their limited interpretations, that literature classes for non-English speakers must take into consideration much more than the students' vocabulary level or comprehension ability. Clearly, if the students have cultural information to draw upon, they are able to interpret in more depth. Their weak general knowledge about English-speaking cultures should be recognized as a problem of major importance in courses for foreign students, especially

those courses given in American universities to prepare foreign students for higher English classes. Certain examples should be given to show the students how to approach Western literature, for it is possible that analysis in their own culture is done quite differently. Foreign students should be taught which topics are often criticized in our literature, how this criticism is carried out and how a teacher expects the students to analyze readings, both in a general and a specific way. Students from other countries often have a refreshingly different view of our literature and can give valuable interpretations, after they have been shown how to read Western literature. It is the teacher's task to recognize what parts of a story might cause misunderstanding and to present just enough background to aid the student in figuring out the meaning of a passage without giving so much that the student does not try to think on his own. The students must be made aware of the culture gap between their country and the United States, but they should understand that this difference does not necessarily mean their nation is backward or inferior. Foreign students entering American universities should be shown too that sheer language ability is not sufficient for following courses in competition with native American students; the foreigner must take steps to acquire an understanding of the cultural aspects underlying Western literature. The more the student's own society differs from the target culture, the more work he must do in discovering socio-religious customs and determining their importance in American writing. It would be ideal to give foreign students a much fuller English program before they enter regular English classes, but usually a large part of the limited time available is needed for improving grammar and increasing vocabulary. An extensive course providing background for Western literature would be extremely valuable to students from other countries. It might also be profitable to divide students into general cultural groups in any work done in literary analysis, for then the discrepencies between societies could be pointed out by the teacher to the group as a whole; no one, however, would

"lose face" for not knowing as much as a student from a culture more closely resembling that of America. Unquestionably, until students and teachers alike do more to acknowledge the interdependency of language and culture, there will continue to be a culture gap in literature courses for non-English speakers.